

BLIND PEOPLE: THEIR WORKS AND WAYS

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BLIND PEOPLE: THEIR WORKS AND WAYS.*

* *Blind People: their Works and Ways.* By the Rev. B. G. Johns. London: Murray, 1867.

IN a small volume of not quite two hundred pages, Mr. Johns has put together a good deal of curious information about the blind. The fault of the book is a want of definiteness. Anecdotes drawn from all kinds of sources are too much mixed up with facts which the author has himself observed. The biographies in particular are extremely fragmentary, amounting to little more than a statement of what the subjects of them were able to do, without any explanation of the process by which they arrived at their proficiency. In short, *Blind People: their Works and Ways*, is neither a scientific discussion on the action of blindness on the uninjured senses, nor a manual of the intellectual discipline to which the blind are capable of being subjected, nor a collection of authenticated facts which may serve as data for future inquirers; it partakes a little of the nature of all three. The book has suffered from a pardonable desire on the part of the writer to make it interesting. A really accurate and detailed life of a blind man would be extremely valuable as a basis for a system of treatment. Unfortunately, however, no materials seem to exist for such a work in any remarkable instance. Even "in the life of such a man as Saunderson," says Mr. Johns, "we read that he soon learned all that school could teach him; that he then set to work at home

almost single-handed, and yet in a few months went up to Cambridge with the fame of a great mathematician. But of the manner in which he achieved this wondrous success, and of the way in which he laid up his stores of learning, we know nothing." Of course, where the means at his disposal are so scanty, an author cannot be blamed for making but little of them. But Mr. Johns has had opportunities of another kind, which, if properly used, would have enabled him to supply much that is wanting in previous works on the subject. He has been labouring among the blind, he tells us, for the last seventeen years, and his position as Chaplain of the well-known Blind School in St. George's Fields must have made him acquainted with a large number of facts relating to the training of blind children. A judicious selection from these would have been better worth reading than any number of "sketches of the lives of famous blind men," of whom, as Mr. Johns confesses, hardly any thing is known with that minuteness which is necessary to make the knowledge useful.

The geographical statistics of blindness are extremely puzzling. In Norway one person in every 540 is blind; in Sweden only one in 1,419. France has one in 938; Belgium one in 1,233. Across the Atlantic, the United States have only one in 2,470, by far the smallest proportion of any country on record; but this exemption does not extend to the British Colonies, for Newfoundland has one in 1,426. In England and Wales the variations are equally conspicuous. In Cheshire and Lancashire the proportion is one in 1,253; in Bedfordshire still less, one in 1,325. In the Eastern counties it is one in 902; in Wilts, Dorset, Devon, and Cornwall, one in 763; in Herefordshire, one in 693. We know of no theory on which these figures can be explained, though the comparative immunity of the great manufacturing counties and of Bedfordshire, where straw-plaiting largely prevails, seems to point to indoor occupations as less injurious to the sight than outdoor — a conclusion which would hardly have been arrived *a priori*. Of the 20,000 blind people in England, about 2,700 are said to be under twenty years of age. A great proportion of this number belong to a class which cannot afford to give its children the peculiar education they require; but, strange to say, the free blind schools are not full. The twelve chief schools in England have room for a little over 900 scholars, but at the census of 1861, only 760 were actually receiving instruction in them. Of the adult blind a

considerable number are engaged in ordinary work as labourers, miners, blacksmiths, shoemakers, tailors, and other similar occupations, while a smaller proportion carry on those outlying trades — basket-making, mat-making, broom-making, and the like — which seem especially appropriated to blind men. Of the women, about 200 are in domestic service, and Mr. Johns says that the experience of the schools has proved that blind girls can "do all a housemaid's work (when the geography of the house is once known), make the beds, lay the dinner and breakfast table, shake the carpets, and help at the washing tub." As far as "laying the dinner and breakfast table" is concerned, we can easily believe in the efficiency of blind people. Ordinary servants so rarely use their eyes to any purpose, that a little delicacy of touch must be ample compensation for absence of sight. There are about one hundred blind dressmakers. Of the classes below these Mr. Johns mentions only a few individuals, all more or less (and some unpleasantly) known to Londoners. He tells us that the tall young man, "in rusty black clothes and kid gloves," who often "plants himself with his back firmly against the wall of the National Gallery," probably in fine weather makes four or five shillings a day. The blind street readers — those offensive personages who finger out St. Paul's Epistles for stray pence — seem to be less successful; at least one of them professes to make only two and sixpence a week by this means. Mr. Johns evidently suspects the genuineness of the accomplishment, as he remarks that a performer of this sort "reads on glibly enough in all weathers, rain, east wind, or snow, when the finger of an unprofessional blind boy would be utterly disabled." Of another street celebrity, "Blind Sarah," Mr. Johns says: —

She had been upon the streets of London for forty years, having been born in 1786, and cast adrift by the Workhouse at the age of twenty. Her instrument was the hurdy-gurdy — the "Cymbal" she insisted on calling it, which it took her five months to learn. During her forty years of wandering she had had four guides, and had worn out three instruments. It took her about three weeks to learn a new tune on the hurdy-gurdy; and her complete stock rarely exceeded a dozen. . . . Nothing could be more forlornly hideous than the noise she managed to extract from the "cymbals;" yet she contrived to rouse the pity of passers-by by her destitute appearance, if not by the beauty of her music, of which she loved to say, "King David used to play on one of these here instruments, which it isn't hard to play; the only thing

*i*s to kip the works covered up, or the half-pence is apt to drop in.

Even the hurdy-gurdy, distracting as it is to the listener, must to the performer be a relief from the monotony of the day. A drearier picture of life can hardly be conceived than that given by one blind beggar :—“Here I stands, and often feels as if half asleep or dreaming. No one does better than I do, because I sticks to it ; and it’s sometimes twelve o’clock at night before I leaves the streets. I never has no amusement ; always out here, wet or dry, except on Sundays.”

Elementary education is of more importance perhaps to the blind than to any other class in the community, and it is a matter for regret that so little has hitherto been done to simplify and cheapen the process of reading by touch. This neglect is partly due to the devotion to rival systems of embossed printing, which has absorbed so much attention. The trouble which, rightly bestowed, might already have multiplied books, has been wasted in the search for an ideally perfect type in which to print them. Mr. Frere’s system is “based entirely on the phonetic principle, and is conveyed to the touch of the blind reader by a series of stenographic signs.” It is, in fact, “an elaborate system of shorthand,” with an alphabet of twenty-nine signs composed of angles, crescents, and dots. Mr. Lucas’s system is also one of shorthand. It has an alphabet redundant in eight characters, and deficient in ten, and the signs have usually two or more distinct meanings. Thus, an upright comma stands for *h*, and *h* may mean “he,” “have,” or “hither.” Mr. Moore’s system retains the ordinary number and names of letters, but substitutes for the Roman character a set of combinations of one or two lines. All these helps to reading have two great defects. If the blind man could read before he became blind his previous knowledge is thrown away. If he could not do so, the use of an arbitrary alphabet — still more of shorthand — prevents him from getting any help from people who can see, unless they happen to be acquainted with the particular system employed. In the case of the embossed Roman type, if a blind child comes to a hard word he has simply to ask any one who can read to spell it for him. With the other characters, the help at command is limited to those among his fellow-sufferers who have been taught on the same plan with himself :—

The use of the Roman letter helps the blind boy to read as all the rest of the world reads ; to spell and to write as they do. The other three systems absolutely prevent his doing so, and inflict upon him the intolerable hardship of learning a semi-barbarous jangle which no one with eyes can understand, and which he himself is unable to express in writing. Sooner or later (the sooner the better) some one system of embossed printing will be generally adopted, and it must embrace at least the following features :—

1. It must resemble as nearly as possible the type in use among seeing men ; that the blind scholar, in learning to read, may have every possible help from his remembrance of letters he *may* once have *seen*, but which now his fingers must feel for him, or from any one who can read an ordinary book ; or, if need be, that a friend may read to him.
2. the words must be *correctly* spelt in full ; that when he learns to write, others may read his written words.
3. All must agree on a clear, sharp type which the finger of the adult, hardened by rough work, and the keen touch of the child may be alike able to discern.

Certainly it is not creditable to our facility of invention that a New Testament in embossed Roman type should still cost 2*l.*, and that, as a natural consequence, books of this kind should be few.

It is, as we have said, unfortunate that Mr. Johns should not have given a fuller account of the particular school upon the merits and successes of which he is so well qualified to speak. No charity is more deserving of public support than an institution for training the blind. However kindly blind children may be treated, it is hardly possible that home teaching should supply the place of the experienced and systematic attention which they meet with in a school specially set apart for them. In almost every detail their education must differ from that given to ordinary children. They can learn nothing from imitating others ; every step in their progress must be conscious and individual. Even the occasional illustrations from his own observations at St. George’s Fields, which are scattered over Mr. Johns’ pages are extremely interesting. The gradual disappearance of that listless discontent which often characterizes the untrained blind must be worth watching. The new-comer, hitherto accustomed perhaps to one small room, is introduced into a rambling building, stretching over nearly two acres of ground. For the first few days he has to depend on a teacher’s, a fellow-pupil’s, hand, for all the guidance he wants. In a month or so, however, all this will be altered, and he will “find his way

from the dining-room to the basket-shop, and down that shop 150 yards long, just to the very sight of his own box." In this shop there are some fifty boys and men, all talking or humming tunes as they work, and constantly moving from one part of the room to another. But in spite of this constant noise, a boy who wants to ask his teacher about some detail of his work knows if he has left the room, and rises, without hesitation, the instant the door opens for his return, though numbers of people may have passed in during the interval. After working-hours on a wet winter's day, the shop is filled with boys, walking round it in couples, talking or singing uproariously. "Every two minutes some boy darts out from the crowd, or rushes in to join it, but in neither does he jostle friend or foe." Another shop serves after six, P.M. as a club-room for the first twenty boys in the school, where they play chess or draughts, emboss letters to their friends, or listen to a teacher who has volunteered to read aloud to them, the latter of course being an especial treat, from the scarcity of books in their own character. These, and a very few other, passing notices are all that Mr. Johns gives us. It is to be hoped that when he next writes on a subject which he might so easily make his own, he will supply this defect; and, instead of the additional biographies which he promises, give us more details derived from his own experiences among living blind people. There may be smaller and less proficient schools, which would be glad to profit by the history of St. George's Fields; and nothing is so likely to lead to the multiplication of such undertakings as the publicity given to the success which has attended one of them.

